

Iñupiaq Language and Culture Seminar at the Arctic Studies Center

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Four days of intensive dialogue among fluent speakers of Iñupiaq, Alaska's northernmost Native tongue, created a unique record of the language's vanishing "high forms," its rich lexicon of terms for traditional objects and cultural practices, and the nuances of variation among several dialects. Organized by the Arctic Studies Center in Anchorage with funding from the **National Park Service's** Shared Beringian Heritage program and in-kind support from **Alaska Airlines**, **Kawerak, Inc.**, and the **North Slope Borough School District** (NSBSD), the seminar on January 25-28, 2011 had two principal goals. The first was to assist in the recording and documentation of a language that is now spoken fluently by fewer than 600 people, 92% of whom are over the age of 65 according to a recent survey by the **Aqqaluk Trust** (Northwest Alaska Native Association). The second was to create teaching videos for Iñupiaq language and culture programs in the North Slope Borough, Northwest Arctic, and Bering Strait school districts.



Principal advisers to the project – who are both among the youngest fluent speakers of the language – are **Jana Harcharek** of Barrow, Director of the NSBSD's Iñupiaq Education Program, and **Bernadette Alvanna-Stimpfle**, Director of the Eskimo Heritage Program at Kawerak in Nome. Elder participants in the January session included **Willie Goodwin**, **Herbert Foster, Sr.**, and **Alvira Downey** of Kotzebue; **Faye Ongtowsruk** of Wales; **Sylvester Ayek** of Nome, who was born on King Island; and **Rachel Riley** of Anaktuvuk Pass. ASC's Assistant Exhibition Curator, **Dawn Biddison**, took a major role in arranging and conducting the meeting, and intern **Kaare Erickson**, an Iñupiaq graduate student originally from Unalakleet, assisted during the workshop.

The Iñupiaq group took delight in each other's company and in the chance to converse at length in their shared first language. The videotaped discussions focused on a series of 22 objects selected from the Smithsonian collections that are on display in the ASC exhibition gallery, including a Sledge Island walrus harpoon (*unaaq*) collected by Edward W. Nelson in 1880; a skin drum (*qil'aun*) from Point Hope (1906, collector John Hackman); and a woman's caribou fur parka (*qusun'naq*) from Barrow, acquired by John Murdoch during the 1881-83 International Polar Year Expedition. The group recorded detailed, dialect-specific



vocabularies and cultural traditions associated with each item, then individually took turns in front of the video cameras to “teach from the object” in short statements that will be transcribed and translated on DVD presentations for classroom use and web posting. The ASC will work with bilingual curriculum developers to develop a guide and resource book for teaching the words and phrases spoken by elders.



Transcription, translation, writing, and film editing from the Iñupiaq session will continue through 2011. Early next year, a similar language seminar will be held with St. Lawrence Island Yupik elders. Language instructor **Chris Koonooka** (Gambell School) will work with the ASC to implement Phase II of the Shared Beringian Heritage grant, which will include collections-based discussions with fluent speakers and the preparation of teaching films and curriculum materials in St. Lawrence

Island/Siberian Yupik. The overall Beringian Heritage project in both languages represents one of the Arctic Studies Center’s major initiatives under the National Museum of Natural History’s **Recovering Voices** program.

Anchorage Museum staff **Monica Shah** (Director of Collections), **Doug Adams** (Information Technology Director), **Ryan Kenny** (Registrar), **Darian LaTocha** (Collections Manager), **Julie Farnham** (Collections Database Manager), and **Nick Lynch** (AV Technician) all ably and generously contributed to implementation of the January workshop. The program took full advantage of both the high-tech recording capabilities of the ASC’s Community Consultation Room (CCR) and of the exhibition design, which allows the display cases to be opened and for objects to be removed and transported to the CCR for hands-on study. We thank Anchorage Museum Director **James Pepper Henry** and Deputy Director **Suzi Jones** for their enthusiastic support of this collaborative Smithsonian program.